

Editorial

I: Imperial Overreach

Three thousand four hundred British troops are shortly to be sent to Southern Afghanistan to the province of Helmand. They will be part of a six thousand-strong Nato force announced on 8th December 2005. As they go in, some four thousand Americans will withdraw.

It was alleged that the war in Afghanistan was over in the year 2001. All the arts of the American Air Force had been deployed to complete the destruction of Kabul, begun by the Soviet Union. Bandits of all kinds were mustered in an army of desperadoes, which completed on the ground the labours of the airmen above it. Wholesale production of opium then resumed after the rout of the Taliban.

But the revival of the opium economy has hardly improved the polity. President Karzai rules some or even most of Kabul, rather uneasily and with the help of strong forces of bodyguards. The rest of the country seethes under the protection of a wide variety of narcotic entrepreneurs, tribal commanders and long established warlords. The Americans continue to maintain an outpost at Bagram, to man their torture facilities and to host the long-delayed nemesis of Osama bin Laden. They have no appetite, they tell us, for nation building: and indeed nation building is not the most attractive project for this territory, which has resolutely defeated earlier 'civilising' missions over the centuries, has already made a potent contribution to the downfall of the Soviet Union, and is busily engaged in aiding that of the United States of America.

It takes the political genius of Tony Blair to lead beleaguered remnants of the British Empire into a battle such as this, already so comprehensively lost by the major powers in the modern world.

The deployment announced by Adam Ingram in November 2005 has the objective of 'restoring Afghanistan as a secure and stable state, and preventing the country from again becoming a haven for global terrorists'. Here we go again.

The International Security Assistance Force is a wholly owned subsidiary of Nato, operating on the basis of very reluctantly accepted Jubilee decisions of that organisation to operate 'out of area'. The list of countries committed to such operations is very long. It begins with Albania, Austria and Azerbaijan, and it labours through the alphabet to Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. It took all Bill Clinton's wiles, and the experience of George Robertson as a compositor and stitcher-up of trade union motions, to patch together the agreement by Nato, to operate 'out of area'. So it came about that a total of nine thousand cosmopolitan troops found themselves deployed in the least hospitable parts of Afghanistan.

For most of the thirty-five participating nations, they have gone there under a token agreement, to dispatch minute numbers of qualified observers or specialists, ones or twos or tens, to endure the acute discomforts of life on the frontier. For those who have undertaken to do marginally more, the issue is highly contentious,

and the Dutch are already involved in elaborate arguments about extricating themselves. French, Germans and Spaniards have undertaken responsibilities to maintain order in Kabul, but they have no appetite to extend the benefits of nationhood to the rest of the country, leave alone to turbulent Helmand, which is a hotbed of the re-emergent Taliban.

There is, of course, a powerful argument for dispatching an expeditionary force led by John Reid, the New Labour Minister of Defence, composed of all the Blair acolytes. Whatever else such a force might accomplish, it would probably generate, among the none-too-many survivors, a wholesome diminution of the appetite for imperial overreach. But it is difficult to see why normal British soldiers should deserve to be put through this experience.

New Labour has already eradicated the opium poppy crop once. It sent Clare Short to ensure that it was uprooted, at a time when six Afghan provinces were growing poppies. Now the UN tells us that there are twenty-eight provinces in which the poppies flourish, to the immense advantage of the heroin market around the world, particularly in Britain.

In *The Guardian* (4th January 2006) Simon Jenkins delivered a fitting response to this decision, characterising it as ‘the half-baked product of Tony Blair’s global machismo’. Henry McCubbin wrote to Simon Jenkins afterwards:

‘I was pleased to see that you quoted from Tony Blair’s 1999 Speech to the Chicago Chamber of Commerce in your article based on Britain’s additional deployment to Afghanistan. Blair was not just setting down the limits of military deployment in that speech, he was recasting Britain’s foreign policy as one based on militaristic solutions to international disputes. A point not often picked up by commentators.

Forewarnings of this change were made apparent within the Labour Party when Blair ditched Clause Four in 1995. The headline was Labour discarding its commitments to common ownership, but also contained within Clause Four were Labour’s stated principles with regards to the resolution of international disputes. This laid down that the UN was to be the final arbiter in disputes between nations. The Blair Clause Four removed this commitment. The change was noticed and a group of Labour Members of the European Parliament, myself included, requested that the proposed text be amended to reinstate this commitment, but, alas, amendments were disallowed. Meantime the courtiers, who had already started to surround Blair, dismissed our views contemptuously, stating that we should have no fears that New Labour would become warmongers, and that we were being disloyal to the project by doubting the leader’s integrity.

Nato’s new “out of area role” now looks quite unachievable as the major powers back off humanitarian intervention, which by custom, practice and necessity has been driven to fall under the logic of the military who have been put in charge of such operations. To me it would appear that humanitarian intervention sees the skies darken with B-52s long before the ambulances and truckloads of aid appear.

But expect much more of this. The lifetime costs of Blair’s greatest folly, the construction and equipping of two giant aircraft carriers at a lifetime cost of £31 billion, will have to be reviewed, just as Denis Healey had to do with aircraft carriers in the sixties. Their use can only be out of area, i.e. the poor, racially and culturally different south where we will, as in Joseph Conrad’s novel, be projecting our imperial might by

letting off loud explosions in the Heart of Darkness to remind the restless natives who is in charge.

Blair's 1999 speech is indeed seminal and has turned out to be deadly for many innocents. But try as you may, I defy you to find any serious writings or speeches on this subject prior to Blair becoming Leader of the Labour Party in 1994 or Prime Minister in 1997. He showed what can best be described as indifference to the subject until he met with the likes of Jonathan Powell.'

If those whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad, then the victims must be compelled to wonder why the gap between madness and destruction is so unconscionably long.

Ken Coates

II: A Case to Answer

In August 2004 Adam Price, MP, a leading spokesman of the Welsh Nationalists in Parliament, published a report on 'The potential impeachment of the Prime Minister for High Crimes and Misdemeanours in relation to the invasion of Iraq'. He quickly gained support from the Scottish Nationalists, with the powerful advocacy of Alex Salmond, MP. But then he attracted the attention of the Whips, whose shadow fell across the other Parties with varying efficiency. All the Labour Members were intimidated, and most of the Liberals and Conservatives. Some brave souls stood out, and were able to carry the argument further afield into the country.

In October 2004 we published the report as a little book. It had been written by Glen Rangwala and Dan Plesch, and maintained a consistently high level of argument. But high levels of argument do not necessarily wash away the bad intentions of the Whips, who have surely been reinforced in all their authoritarian biases by the results of the Iraq war.

Now, another brave voice speaks out. General Sir Michael Rose has published a strong appeal in *The Guardian*. It appeared under the headline 'Enough of his excuses: Blair must be impeached over Iraq' (January 10th 2006).

'Wars are won when the people, government and army work together for a common cause in which they genuinely believe. Whereas the people may be initially uncertain about military intervention, politicians will often be the strongest advocates – blinded by the imperatives of their political views. It will invariably be military commanders who are most cautious about using force – for they understand better than most the consequences of engaging in war.

Although in a true democracy they must remain subordinate to their political masters, they have a clear responsibility to point out when political strategies are flawed or inadequately resourced. Since they might also have to ask their soldiers to sacrifice their lives, they must be assured that a war is just, legal and the last resort available. Yet three years ago this country was somehow led by the prime minister into war in Iraq where few, if any, of these requirements were met.

Most importantly a clear justification for the war in Iraq was never sufficiently made by Tony Blair – for the intelligence he presented was also embarrassingly patchy and inconsistent. What is more, his unequivocal statement to the House of Commons that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be used within 45 minutes was made without being properly validated – for it was decided in Washington and London to launch the invasion of Iraq early, on the basis of the flimsy evidence available. This was done without asking the UN weapons inspectors, who were actually on the ground in Iraq, to investigate this allegation. Ultimately, as the inspectors suspected and as we now all know, it turned out that there were no such weapons. Britain had been led into war on false pretences. It was a war that was to unleash untold suffering on the Iraqi people and cause grave damage to the west's prospects in the wider war against global terror.

Nevertheless, today the Prime Minister seeks to persuade the world that the war was justifiable because Saddam Hussein was toppled and there now exists in Iraq a slender hope of democracy. The Iraqi elections are a creditable achievement by the coalition forces. But it must be remembered that a general election was previously held in Iraq in 1956, and within two years the country had fallen under military rule. Without adequate security and the necessary democratic institutions in place, there are absolutely no long-term guarantees that democracy will endure.

Before the invasion, regime change was never cited as a reason for going to war. Indeed, Mr. Blair insisted that regime change was not, nor ever could be, a reason for going to war. Had such a justification been fully debated in parliament, it is exceedingly unlikely that the necessary political support would have been forthcoming. It was the apparent need to defend ourselves against a dire threat – so vividly described by Mr. Blair in the Commons – that finally won the political argument.

During the build-up to war and since, most of the electorate of this country have consistently opposed the decision to invade. People have seen their political wishes ignored for reasons now proved false. But there has been no attempt in Parliament to call Mr. Blair personally to account for what has transpired to be a blunder of enormous strategic significance. It should come as no surprise therefore that so many of this country's voters have turned their backs on a democratic system they feel has so little credibility and is so unresponsive.

One obvious way of re-engaging these disaffected voters would be for Parliament to accept that it wrongly supported the war – but only because it believed what Mr. Blair told them. Now it is clear that Parliament was misled by Mr. Blair, either wittingly or unwittingly, Parliament should also call on him for a full explanation as to why he went to war. It is not a sufficient excuse for Mr. Blair to say that he acted in good faith and that his decisions were based on the intelligence he had been given. For it is the clear responsibility of people in his position to test intelligence. No intelligence can ever be taken at face value. Indeed it is negligent so to do.

Parliament should therefore ascertain how far the Prime Minister did evaluate intelligence regarding weapons of mass destruction and how he assessed the reliability of the many sources that provided that intelligence. It should ask him what corroborating evidence there was for his specific statement about weapons of mass destruction – and why more use was not made of the UN inspectors on the ground in Iraq to test the validity of that statement. It should inquire just how much he discounted the mass of intelligence that came in from the Iraqi National Congress – a body that had a vested interest in removing Saddam from power. The list of possible questions is huge

and would no doubt be usefully expanded during any hearings.

Mr. Blair is an able barrister who should relish the opportunity to put his side of the case. No one can undo the decision to go to war. But the impeachment of Mr. Blair is now something I believe must happen if we are to rekindle interest in the democratic process.'

General Sir Michael Rose was adjutant general of the British Army and Commander of the UN Protection Force in Bosnia.



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**General Sir Michael Rose in
The Guardian 10/1/06**

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